

2-14-2009

Lettermen

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Recommended Citation

Center for Performing Arts, "Lettermen" (2009). *Center for Performing Arts Memorabilia*. Book 240.
http://opus.govst.edu/cpa_memorabilia/240

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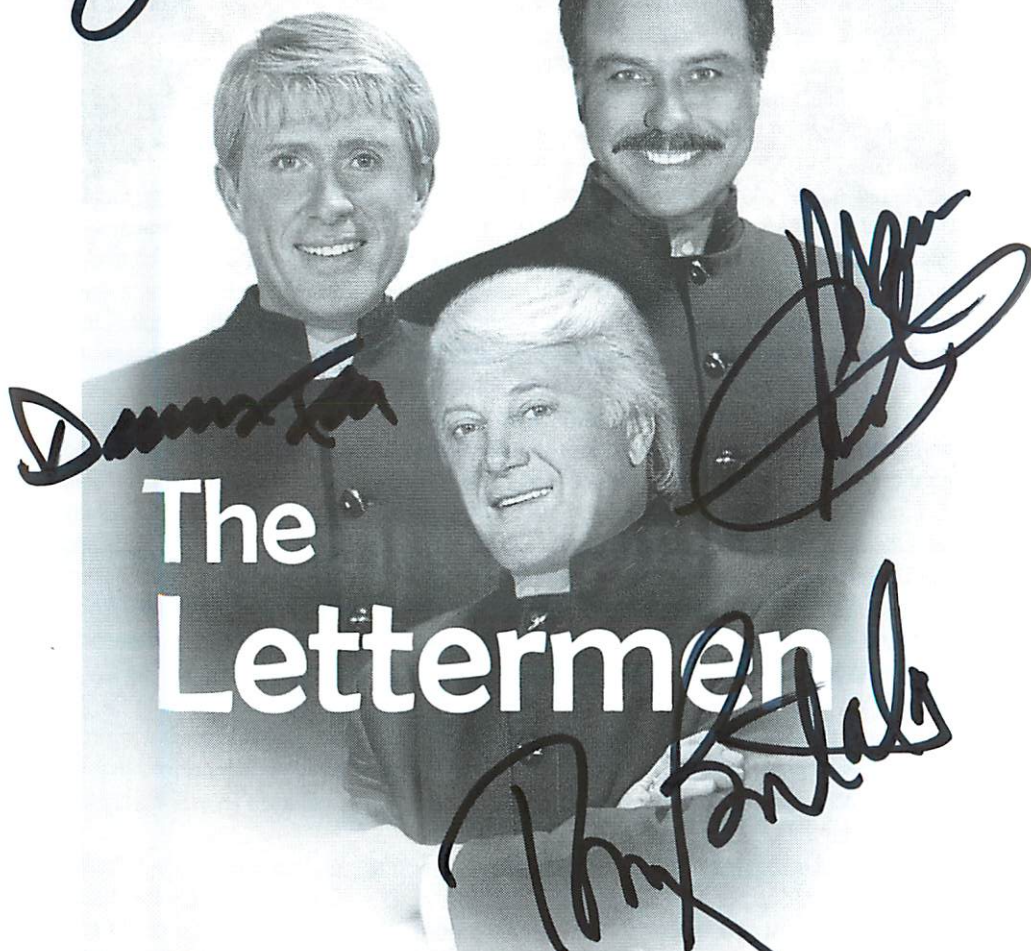


THE CENTER FOR PERFORMING ARTS

Governors State University

presents

Just call me Lou!



The Lettermen

Saturday, February 14, 2009

The Center for Performing Arts' 2008-2009 Season is sponsored
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The one change Tony Butala, original founding member of The Lettermen, would have made in the fifty year career of one of the most popular vocal groups in history is a surprising one. "We chose the wrong name!" he exclaims. "In the late '50's, when you started a vocal group and wanted to stand out from the crowd, all you had to do was use a novel new name that would give your group a unique look and image. If you're a new group in today's world and you want to get noticed, you have to dye your hair purple, multi-pierce your face, ears and tongue, and even then you may not be different enough to get some notoriety."

In the 1950's, most vocal groups had school type names such as Danny & the Juniors, The Four Freshmen and The Four Preps. They chose the name The Lettermen and wore letter sweaters. By the time those names became passe in the 1960's, The Lettermen already had a few hits and were a tremendous success. Their label, Capitol Records, was reluctant to market a new name, as the group wanted, because The Lettermen name was already so familiar world-wide. (The group did, at least, pack away the sweaters.)

Butala began singing professionally at age seven in Sharon, Pennsylvania and by the age of eight on KDKA Radio in Pittsburgh, PA. Within a few years he moved to Hollywood, California to become a member of the famous Mitchell Boys Choir, who since 1932 had appeared in over one hundred motion pictures, scores of television and radio shows, radio & television commercials, and world-wide concert tours. While in the choir, he appeared in such classic films as *White Christmas*, *Peter Pan*, *War of the Worlds* and *On Moonlight Bay*. In the mid '50's, while still in high school in Hollywood, Butala formed The Fourmost, a vocal group of three ex-Mitchell Boy Choir friends and a female classmate, Concetta Ingolia. In a few years, after moderate local success, Concetta exited the group to be cast in a new TV series, "Hawaiian Eye," and chose the stage name Connie Stevens.

The Lettermen name first appeared in February, 1958 on the marquee of the Desert Inn Hotel Resort in Las Vegas, where Butala, Mike Barnett and Talmadge Russell performed in the record-shattering revue, "Newcomers of 1928," which starred Paul Whiteman, silent film comic Buster Keaton, singers Rudy Vallee and Harry Richmond, film star Fifi D'Orsay and the sneezing comedian Billy Gilbert. Butala played the part of Bing Crosby, who sang lead in the Rhythm Boys, the hit 1920's vocal group that toured with Paul Whiteman's Orchestra.

By 1960, The Lettermen - now Butala, Jim Pike (whose falsetto pre-dated Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons) and Bob Engemann - were signed to Warner Brothers Records and released their first singles: "Their Hearts Were Full of Spring" b/w "When" and "The Magic Sound" b/w "Two Hearts." In 1961, Nic Venet, a new, young, creative A&R man with Capitol Records who years earlier had written a few songs with Butala, was played these first records. Venet was impressed by their unique natural close harmonic blend and, convinced that he could produce a hit record with them, signed them to what turned out to be an over twenty-five year contract with Capitol Records.

In the summer of 1961, for their debut doo-wop single "That's My Desire," Capitol Records decided to put a ballad on the B-side, figuring DJs would have to play the A-side because the B-side ballad did not necessarily possess the commercial sound of the era. That ballad was "The Way You Look Tonight." Soft and romantic, it was a departure from the rock 'n' roll of the day and listener requests put it on DJ play lists nationwide. The song shot to No. 13 on the Billboard chart. Their second single, "When I Fall In Love," another slow ballad, did even better at No. 7, and established The Lettermen among the most romantic singing groups of the '60's. In 1962, "Come Back Silly Girl" reached No.17, while their debut album, "A Song for Young Love" hit the Top 10. It was their first of 32 straight Top 40 Albums.

In almost every poll, The Lettermen were named Best New Group or Best Vocal Group, as two more albums followed in 1962 - "*Once Upon A Time*" and "*Jim, Tony and Bob*" the latter an effort to segue away from The Lettermen name. Among those 32 consecutive Top 40 albums in the USA, four were certified gold: "*The Lettermen!!!... And Live*" (1967), "*Goin' Out of My Head*" (1968), "*Best of The Lettermen*" (1969) and "*Hurt So Bad*" (1970).

The '60's and early '70's saw The Lettermen score over 25 chart hit singles, including "Theme From 'A Summer Place'" (No. 16, 1965, from the Sandra Dee / Troy Donahue film), "Goin' Out of My Head / Can't Take My Eyes Off You" (No. 7, 1968, the first hit record ever to completely integrate two songs as one) and "Hurt So Bad" (No. 12, 1969). Their signature sound made romantic standards of songs such as "Smile," "Put Your Head On My Shoulder," "Shangri-La," "Love" and many more.

Even as the British Invasion dimmed American artist record sales in the 1960's, TV and concert appearances sustained The Lettermen. They toured with George Burns, Jack Benny, Bob Hope and Bill Cosby; performed on bills with Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, Jerry Lewis, Dean Martin, Jimmy Durante, Debbie Reynolds, Sam Cooke, and Sammy Davis, Jr., appeared several times on "The Ed Sullivan Show," and were regulars on "The Red Skelton Show" and "The Hollywood Palace." Butala estimates some 200 further appearances on TV shows such as Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" series, and on talk and variety shows with Johnny Carson, Mike Douglas, Merv Griffin, Jack Paar, Milton Berle, Steve Allen, Dinah Shore, and many others.

In 1979, they formed their own label, Alpha Omega Records, and have continually averaged at least one album per year. Some of their newer CD albums, now numbering over 70, are: "*The Lettermen - Why I Love Her*," "*The Lettermen - Live In The Philippines*," and their newest holiday CD "*The Most Wonderful Time of the Year*".

The group has the rare ability to perform successfully in diverse venues, from small college campuses to the posh Empire Room at The Waldorf Astoria in New York City; from the Iowa State Fair to main showrooms in Las Vegas, Nevada; from U.S.O. shows in the jungles of Thailand and Cambodia to elegant concert halls with world renowned symphony orchestras. "Our one rule," says Butala, "is never dress below the level of your audience." Their stage wardrobe is comprised of denim jeans for outdoor festivals and fairs, casual dress for colleges, tuxedos for hotels, and glitzy garb for casino showrooms.

They've received eighteen gold records internationally, toured in Japan, Philippines, China, Thailand, Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong, Germany, France, South America, Canada, Mexico and Saudi Arabia, and recorded songs in over fourteen languages. The Lettermen have also appeared in most of the major sports arenas in the U.S. with their touching a cappella rendition of the National Anthem. *People Magazine* honored their version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" by voting them "one of the best 'anthem-singing' groups in sports."

Over the years, the trio has experienced some personnel changes. Engemann left in 1967, replaced by Gary Pike, Jim Pike's younger brother. A few years later, due to vocal problems, Jim left the group and was replaced by his even younger brother, Donny Pike. This combination remained stable through the 70's and early 80's, lead by constant member Tony Butala. Since then, Mark Preston, Ernie Pontiere, Bobby Poynton, Don Campeau, and Chad Nichols have each had stints in The Lettermen.

Donovan Tea joined The Lettermen in 1984 and his tenure of over twenty years has been the longest other than Butala's. Tea was born in Houston, Texas, and started singing professionally at 17, when he won an international vocal competition in Guilford,

England. After touring Europe, he returned home to sing at the Hollywood Bowl with the L.A. Master Chorale. At 18 he became a lead singer for The Young Americans, opening for the likes of Sammy Davis, Jr., Rich Little and Tony Bennett, and performed for President Gerald Ford in Washington, D.C. While with The Young Americans, he guest-starred on NBC's holiday special "Merry Christmas, Fred, From The Crosbys," performing a tap dance with Fred Astaire and singing backup for Bing Crosby on "White Christmas." At 22, Tea became a solo act performing in nightclubs and on cruise ships before he was featured in two main showroom extravaganzas at The Dunes and Stardust hotels in Las Vegas. It was during this time when he first crossed paths with The Lettermen, becoming a member in the fall of 1984. Donovan's most favorite things in life are his wife Darla, his children Landry and Lawson, and working his cattle ranch in North Central Tennessee.

Mark Preston was born in South Bend, Indiana, in the shadow of the University of Notre Dame. Even though he is of Polish ancestry, was a Russian linguist in the Air Force, married to a Croatian-American from Pennsylvania, he has always been a most avid fan of the Notre Dame Football Fighting Irish. Mark eventually moved to Los Angeles, California, and got a job singing at the prestigious nightclub "The Horn" where he shared the bill with another vocalist, Donovan Scott Tea. They formed a friendship that continues to the present day. After an appearance on the "Dinah Shore Television Show", Mark was called to Las Vegas, Reno and Lake Tahoe, where he worked as a featured soloist at many major showrooms. *Variety* magazine named him "one of the finest entertainers in show business." He did many shows with Phyllis Diller, and as an actor/singer made several appearances on the hit television series "Vegas\$" as well as being the photo double and stand-in for the show's star Robert Urich. He went on to do guest appearances on several network specials. He co-hosted numerous weeks on "Braun & Company", a syndicated variety show originating from Cincinnati, Ohio. It was on this show that he met The Lettermen when they made a guest appearance. Tony Butala was so impressed with Mark and his voice that he mentioned if a vacancy should happen in The Lettermen, he would want Mark to fill the vacancy.

In a matter of one year a double vacancy occurred and Mark, along with his best friend Donovan Tea, whom he recommended to Tony, joined The Lettermen for their first show on the same day - September 4, 1984. During his four year tenure with The Lettermen, he, Donovan and Tony recorded a Christmas Video and album titled "*It Feels Like Christmas*", and the "*Why I Love Her*" album. Mark left The Lettermen for a while to pursue a highly successful career as one of the all-time major cruise ship star entertainment attractions, but he is now back and going full steam ahead. When not performing, Mark enjoys a good game of golf, a cold beer, Notre Dame football and relaxing at his home in Central Pennsylvania with his lovely wife Michelle.

Tony Butala is proud of the fact that The Lettermen has been a part of Americana for over fifty years. As long as there is a Lettermen group, they will be singing good quality and positive harmony music the whole family can enjoy!

In 1998, Tony Butala fulfilled a long-held dream with the opening of the Vocal Group Hall of Fame and Museum, in Sharon, Pennsylvania. The non-profit organization honors the greatest vocal groups of the world in all genres. Over 90 legendary groups have been inducted so far, and more than 100 memorabilia displays are featured in the Hall of Fame and Museum! Visit the hall online at:

www.VocalHallOfFame.com